

# How to win hearts and minds on social security investment

This briefing provides a summary of a multi-phase programme of public attitudes work the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned *Britain Thinks* to undertake over the course of 15 months in 2022-3, in a bid to identify how to design and frame social security investment in a way that maximises public support.

**Daisy Sands, Head of Campaigns and Public Affairs**

## Introduction

The evidence is overwhelming that, after more than a decade of cuts, our social security system is now unable to protect people from even deep hardship. The Trussell Trust have found that insufficient income from social security is *the most significant driver* of food bank need (State of Hunger, 2021), and upcoming research from JRF (June 2023) finds that around 9 in 10 low-income households on Universal Credit have gone without at least one essential - such as food, energy or basic household goods in the last six months, with 54% having gone without three or more.

The case for serious reform of the system is unequivocal and, whilst investment in social security brings considerable political challenges, recent years have seen a softening of public attitudes<sup>1</sup> and a widening window of opportunity to secure publicly supported reform.

In a bid to harness this more favorable context, JRF commissioned *Britain Thinks*<sup>2</sup> to undertake an expansive programme of public attitudes testing with swing voters, Universal Credit claimants and the wider public, over the course of 15 months in 2022-3, in order to identify how to *design and frame* the action needed in a way that avoids triggering unhelpful tropes and maximises public support.

Here we deployed an innovative ‘feedback loop’ approach where emerging insights from focus group and polling work informed both narrative and (in-house) policy development, which we then took back to the public for further testing and refinement.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in 2011, 60% of people agreed that ‘if welfare benefits weren’t so generous, people would learn to stand on their own two feet’, this dropped to 36% by 2019 (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Now *Thinks Insight and Strategy*

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**This work, alongside detailed policy analysis, resulted in the development of a groundbreaking new policy: the Essentials Guarantee.**

Launched in partnership with the Trussell Trust, this policy would embed, for the first time, a protected minimum level of support for people on Universal Credit, linked to the cost of essentials like food and core bills.

Final testing found this policy is well received: it is relatable, speaks to the public's current concerns and, best of all, feels like 'common sense'. Overall, 'cold' support for the policy (that is, unprimed by any corresponding narrative) is high: 72% support the policy, including 62% of 2019 Tory voters and around 80% for 2019 Labour, Liberal Democrat and SNP voters. Only 8% of the public actively oppose the policy.

This briefing provides a summary of the three phases of work that underpinned the development of this policy and corresponding narrative.

## **Phase I: Connecting the right problem to the right solution**

To build support for any policy it is crucial to have a convincing and compelling articulation of the problem it is intended to address.

Whilst the evidence is clear about the link between inadequate social security and rising poverty and destitution (i.e. the technical descriptions of the problem), years of research at JRF has made clear that such terms can actually work to inhibit effective public engagement (beyond those who are firmly 'progressive') as they can prompt questions and value judgements about what really 'counts' as the problem being presented, why it is occurring and whose fault it is.

As such we began our research with the established research finding that concern about hardship is highest when it is expressed not as a metric or abstract concept, but as a descriptive experience – in this case 'going without essentials'.<sup>3</sup>

We channeled this key insight, along with numerous others related more specifically to views on welfare (such as which groups of claimants the public has the most or least sympathy for) through 10 deliberative focus groups, over two waves in April-June 2022, with swing voters across the country<sup>4</sup> in a bid to test how to **maximise the strength of the going without essentials frame**, as well as how to **connect it clearly in voters' minds to the need for investment in social security**. We followed this with a UK-wide poll (n=4,751) in August 2022 for final refinement and testing purposes.

Alongside confirming that the frame of going without essentials is easily understood and highly **politically salient** and **personally relevant** right now, this process found the power of the problem is best harnessed into support for social security investment when:

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<sup>3</sup> For example, 89% of Labour voters and 90% of Conservative voters agree that a person is in poverty if they *'have not got enough to eat and live without getting into debt'*. View start to fragment, particularly across age and party lines, as wider definitions of poverty are put forward (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Groups were held in the Midlands, Northeast England, Northwest England, Scotland and Wales.

- The system is positioned as being there to support *anyone* in need of help (as opposed to emphasising specific beneficiaries, such as children).
- The system is positioned as being there to provide support and help people get back on their feet during *relatable and commonly experienced times of need* such as losing a job, falling ill or breaking up with a partner.
- *Simple and clear evidence* is provided on how the system is not currently doing the job of protecting people from going without essentials during these times of need (where some people doubt this initially). There is no need to over-explain the negative impacts of going without essentials, as the public already well understand these.
- The policy solution proffered is simple and easy to understand and has a *direct* link to solving the problem of people going without essentials.

These insights both informed the development of our policy solution and the final corresponding narrative, set out below.

*We live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and yet people here in the UK are going without the essentials we all need to get by.*

*Everyone's circumstances can change. Losing your job, needing to care for a sick family member, breaking up with your partner – these are things that can happen to any of us.*

*That's why Universal Credit should offer support to anyone in need of help, but right now it's not providing enough to cover the cost of life's essentials, such as food, household bills and travel costs, with 90% of low-income households receiving Universal Credit going without.*

*Living in a country without a decent safety net is scary. It means we are not properly supported if we face challenging times. Without that safety net, a sudden change of circumstances can be hard to come back from.*

*We can't always deal with what life throws at us on our own, which is why we need to have a system in place that supports us all to afford the essentials while we recover from setbacks.*

*The UK government must make sure the basic rate of Universal Credit at least covers life's essentials and that support can never be pulled below that level.*

Final testing found people feel the narrative is clear (93%) and convincing (79%) and, overall, exposure to it significantly raises public support for 'increasing social security payments' with 67% in support of this *even if they had to pay more in taxes*. This was up from a baseline of 55%, where there was no mention of paying more in taxes.

The narrative increases support to a similar extent across all groups tested, including Labour voters, Conservative voters, swing voters, those with household incomes of £60k+.

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## Phase II: Stress testing the policy

In order to further stress test the policy, which was developed in accordance with the findings from phase I, we undertook a further six focus groups in November 2022: two with Universal Credit claimants<sup>5</sup> and four with swing voters.<sup>6</sup>

These groups aimed to understand **spontaneous ‘real world’ public reaction** to the policy as well as unpick views after **discussion and reflection**, including on how compelling the policy is, where the boundaries for support lie, and how people engage with counterarguments that we’d expect to be raised in challenge to the policy – such as that it costs too much, or would discourage work.

Here we presented participants with the narrative above, as well as more detail on the policy – namely what essentials it covers and the proposed cash amounts. This found:

### 1. The cost of living is the public’s top concern

The cost of living is the public’s top concern both for them personally and for the country as a whole. They blame the Government, who they say are incompetent, and want to see change. Sympathy is also high for those felt to be less fortunate.

“I am really feeling it right now but imagine what it’s like if you’re a young family starting out...it’s not right.”

Swing voter, C2DE.

“Hearing 5 in 6 people are going without at least one essential is concerning – it’s a high proportion of people that are going without.”

Swing voter, BC1.

### 2. Welfare provokes strong emotions, but the ‘Essentials Guarantee’ is easily understood and supported

Whilst understanding about how the social security system actually works is relatively low, the public have strong beliefs about the subject because they know claimants/have claimed before and/or have learned about the system through TV programmes and the news. The public tend to base their views on these touchpoints and use anecdotes to contribute to discussion on welfare, often leading to emotional conversations.

Against this challenging backdrop, there is universal positivity towards the ‘Essentials Guarantee’ on first introduction. It is easily understood, speaks to public concern and feels like ‘common sense’.

“These things can happen to anyone and that does make you stop and think so maybe you’d sit up and take a bit more notice.”

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<sup>5</sup> These took place in Newcastle and Wales.

<sup>6</sup> Swing voter groups were split across ‘red wall’ seats, Midlands swing seats, and Scottish swing seats and were split by socioeconomic groups BC1 and C2DE and age groups 18 – 44 and 45+.

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Swing voter, C2DE.

“This policy wouldn’t affect me at the minute, but if a time came where my circumstances changed and I would have to rely on it I’d be quite worried to be honest.”

Swing voter, BC1.

### 3. But counterarguments resonate strongly, activating deeply held views about the welfare system

Upon discussion, the public spontaneously raise concern about increasing benefits for those they deem ‘undeserving’ of the safety net. Specifically, those they say are ‘work shy’ or who ‘cheat’ the system.

These concerns are exacerbated by (inaccurate) counterarguments that the policy disincentivises work and allows claimants ‘off the hook’ from applying to jobs. Conversely however, warnings about the cost of the policy resonate less with people, many of whom felt raising this was ‘political game playing’.

“I think a quarter of people are taking piss, 1 in 4. Not full benefit fraud – they tell a white lie here and there and then suddenly, you’re earning much more.”

Swing voter, C2DE.

### 4. Rebuttals are strongest when they highlight how the policy is important for helping claimants to work

Most are convinced that it would be harder to work if you didn’t have the essentials. This rebuttal harnesses support for the policy and overrides counterarguments. Participants also say that ideally some conditionality would be in place to abate their concern about work-shy claimants ‘taking advantage’, but ultimately agreed that Universal Credit payments should be raised even if they believe some will ‘abuse’ the system.

“People should be in a position where they can actually afford to cook a healthy meal, that will keep them going and able to get work too.”

Swing voter, C2DE.

### 4. The policy is seen more as a Labour one, but it would increase support for all parties

Finally, we tested how views on the policy changed depending on who the ‘messenger’ was. This found that the policy is seen to be more in line with Labour than Conservative values, however regardless of which party were to propose it, *swing voters report it would make them feel warmer towards that party.*

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## Phase II: Final polling on public support

In February 2023, we undertook a final nationally representative poll (n=4,180) to gauge starting views on the current level of the Universal Credit 'basic rate' (which the Essentials Guarantee would increase), views on the current level once shown it, and support for the policy upon seeing the current level alongside the new Essentials Guarantee proposed level. Participants were not primed by our wider narrative for this work. This found:

- Before seeing the current basic rate for Universal Credit, the public assume it is set too low (50%) and over half (54%) say it should increase.
- On seeing the actual basic rate, two-thirds (66%) say it is lower than they expected, the same amount think it is too low, and a clear majority (69%) support increasing it, including almost three in five (57%) of 2019 Conservative voters.
- The public say the essentials cost £200 for a single adult each week, more than double the current basic rate for a single adult (£85).
- When a short description of the Essentials Guarantee is provided, including the current level of the basic rate and the new Essentials Guarantee level, almost three-quarters (72%) support the policy, including 62% of 2019 Conservative voters and 82% of Labour 2019 voters. Only 8% actively oppose it.

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## Further useful links

[Summary policy report](#) (3 pages)

[Full policy report](#) (39 pages)

[Technical report](#) - containing further analysis, methodology and policy details associated with the main report (32 pages)

## Contact details

For more information or detail on the research outlined here, please contact:

Daisy Sands, Head of Campaigns and Public Affairs, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

[Daisy.sands@jrf.org.uk](mailto:Daisy.sands@jrf.org.uk)